YouTube SEO Complete Checklist

The Algorithm-Proof System to Rank #1 and Grow Your Channel

This checklist is the condensed, action-focused version of the complete YouTube SEO system. Use it as your step-by-step guide for every video you create. Each section builds on the previous one—don't skip steps.

📖 This Checklist is Based On:

YouTube SEO Guide: The Complete Algorithm-Proof System

by Justin Levitt

Available on Amazon: **amazon.com/dp/B0DS81S1SH**

PHASE 1: Strategic Keyword Research

Complete this BEFORE filming anything. This is your foundation.

Step 1: Generate Keyword Ideas (20-30 minutes)

- ☐ **YouTube Autocomplete Search:** Type your broad topic + space. Note all suggestions.
- ☐ **Wildcard Technique:** Use '*' before/after phrases. Try 'how to * for beginners'
- ☐ **ABC Method:** Type your keyword + each letter A-Z. Record all long-tail variations.
- ☐ **TubeBuddy/VidIQ:** Input seed keyword. Export matching terms with 500-5,000 monthly searches.
- ☐ **Question Mining:** Use Google's 'People Also Ask' or AnswerThePublic for question-based keywords.
- ☐ **AI Assistant Prompt:** Ask ChatGPT/Claude: 'Generate 20 YouTube video titles for [niche] targeting [audience] with estimated search volume'

💡 *Goal: Generate 30-50 potential keywords. You'll narrow this down in the next step.*

Step 2: Branch & Leaf Strategic Selection (15 minutes)

- ☐ **Identify Your Branch:** Choose ONE topic cluster to dominate (e.g., 'real estate financing', 'email marketing for e-commerce')
- ☐ **Select 5-10 Leaf Keywords:** Pick specific long-tail questions (8-12 words) within that branch
- ☐ **Target Characteristics:** Each keyword should have 300+ monthly searches, be question-based or how-to focused
- ☐ **Create Content Calendar:** Plan to create 20-30 videos covering this entire branch over 3-6 months

📌 *This strategy builds topical authority—YouTube will recognize you as THE expert on this branch.*

Step 3: Manual Competition Analysis (10 minutes per keyword)

- ☐ **Search in Incognito Mode:** Search your exact keyword on YouTube (logged out)
- ☐ **Analyze Top 5 Results:** Check channel size, view counts, upload date
- ☐ **Match Intent & Format:** Do top videos match your planned style? (tutorial vs. vlog vs. review)
- ☐ **Channel Authority Check:** Are results from channels with <50K subs? (Good sign for small channels)
- ☐ **View-to-Sub Ratio:** Calculate views ÷ channel subscribers. Ratio >0.5 means keyword-driven, not subscriber-driven
- ☐ **Identify Content Gaps:** What did competitors miss? What angle can you add?
- ☐ **Green Light Criteria:** At least 2-3 videos from channels <100K subs ranking in top 10 = GO

⚠️ *If all top results are from channels with 500K+ subs and millions of views, choose a different keyword.*

PHASE 2: Pre-Production Planning

Step 4: Craft Your Title (BEFORE recording)

- ☐ **Keyword Placement:** Target keyword in first 5 words of title
- ☐ **Length Check:** Keep under 60 characters total (mobile visibility)
- ☐ **Title Formula Applied:** Use ONE of these proven structures:

• [Number] + [Keyword] + [Benefit]: '7 YouTube SEO Tips That Actually Work'
• [How to] + [Keyword] + [Specific Result]: 'How to Rank YouTube Videos in 48 Hours'
• [Keyword] + [Year] + [Authority Indicator]: 'YouTube SEO 2026: Complete Guide'
• [Negative] + [Keyword]: 'Stop Making These YouTube SEO Mistakes'

- ☐ **Power Words Added:** Include 1-2: Ultimate, Complete, Proven, Secret, Simple, Fast
- ☐ **Clarity Test:** Read aloud—does it clearly communicate what the video covers?
- ☐ **Avoid Clickbait:** Title must match actual content. No misleading promises.

Step 5: Thumbnail Strategy (Sketch Before Filming)

- ☐ **Design Sketch Created:** Plan layout before recording (saves time later)
- ☐ **Text Overlay Planned:** 3-5 words maximum, large readable font (minimum 60pt)
- ☐ **High Contrast Colors:** Text color contrasts strongly with background
- ☐ **Face/Emotion Included:** Human face with expressive emotion (if appropriate for niche)
- ☐ **Visual Hierarchy:** Main element takes up 60%+ of frame
- ☐ **Consistency Elements:** Brand colors or style that carries across channel

Step 6: Script Your Opening Hook (Critical 30 Seconds)

- ☐ **Hook Formula Selected:** Choose ONE proven opening:

• **Problem Agitation:** 'Struggling to rank your videos? You're making this mistake...'
• **Bold Promise:** 'I'll show you exactly how I ranked #1 in 48 hours'
• **Curiosity Gap:** 'This hidden YouTube feature changed everything...'
• **Direct Value:** 'In the next 10 minutes, you'll learn...'

- ☐ **Keyword Mentioned Early:** Say your target keyword in first 30 seconds (speech recognition)
- ☐ **Pattern Interrupt Planned:** Plan angle change, B-roll, or energy shift at 60-90 seconds
- ☐ **Engagement Request:** Script when you'll ask for like/comment/subscribe (typically 2-3 minutes in)

PHASE 3: Strategic Recording

- ☐ **Deliver on Title Promise Early:** Address main topic within first 2 minutes
- ☐ **Say Keyword 3-5 Times:** Naturally mention target keyword + variations throughout video
- ☐ **Pattern Interrupts Every 60-90 Seconds:** Change camera angle, show screen, cut to B-roll
- ☐ **Internal Video References:** Mention other relevant videos by name ('As I explained in my [topic] video...')
- ☐ **Retention Tactics Applied:**

• Visual changes (graphics, overlays, zooms)
• Audio shifts (music in/out, sound effects)
• Story loops (tease something coming later)

- ☐ **Strong End Screen CTA:** Tell viewers exactly what to watch next (specific video title)
- ☐ **Final Engagement Ask:** End with question for comments section

PHASE 4: Metadata Optimization (Do NOT Rush This)

This is where most creators fail. Take 30-45 minutes to do this right.

Step 7: Final Title Optimization

- ☐ **Keyword in First 60 Characters:** Confirmed
- ☐ **Mobile Preview Check:** Looks good when truncated at 50 characters
- ☐ **Natural Language:** Read aloud—sounds like human speech, not robot
- ☐ **Year Added (if relevant):** '2026' included for timely content

Step 8: Description Optimization (250-500 words ideal)

- ☐ **First 100-150 Characters (CRITICAL):**

• Target keyword in first sentence
• Compelling hook that expands on title
• Will appear as preview snippet in search

- ☐ **Paragraph 1 Complete:** 2-3 sentences summarizing video value
- ☐ **Main Body (Paragraphs 2-3):**

• Detailed overview of what you cover
• Include keyword 2-3 more times naturally
• Secondary keywords and variations woven in
• Mention who this is for and what they'll learn

- ☐ **Timestamps Added (if video >8 minutes):** Chapter markers with keywords in chapter names
- ☐ **Internal Links Included:** Link to 2-3 related videos from your channel
- ☐ **Resources Section:** Links to tools/products mentioned
- ☐ **Social Links:** Your other platforms listed

- ☐ **Call-to-Action:** Clear next step (subscribe, download resource, watch another video)
- ☐ **Hashtags (2-3 only):** #[MainKeyword] #[SecondaryKeyword] #[Niche]

💡 Pro Tip: Use AI (ChatGPT/Claude) to generate initial draft from your transcript, then refine for accuracy.

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Step 9: Strategic Tag Selection (8-15 tags)

- ☐ **First Tag = Exact Target Keyword:** Most important tag
- ☐ **Include Mix:**

• 2-3 broad tags ('YouTube SEO', 'video marketing')
• 3-5 specific long-tail tags ('YouTube SEO for beginners 2026')
• 2-3 related topic tags ('content strategy', 'algorithm tips')

- ☐ **Misspelling Coverage:** Add common misspellings if applicable
- ☐ **Competitor Tag Research:** Check tags on top 3 ranking videos (use TubeBuddy/VidIQ)
- ☐ **Avoid:** No irrelevant tags, no trending-but-unrelated tags, no excessive tagging (quality > quantity)

Step 10: Upload Settings & Advanced Features

- ☐ **Thumbnail Uploaded:** Custom thumbnail (NEVER use auto-generated)
- ☐ **Category Selected:** Choose most relevant (usually Education or How-to)
- ☐ **Visibility Set:** Unlisted for final checks, then Public
- ☐ **Comments Enabled:** Keep on (engagement signals matter)
- ☐ **Subtitles/Captions:** Upload .SRT file if available (helps SEO + accessibility)
- ☐ **End Screen Added:** Last 5-20 seconds

• Promote best performing video OR relevant playlist
• Subscribe button included

- ☐ **Cards Added (2-3):** Link to related videos at relevant moments in video
- ☐ **Playlist Assignment:** Add to relevant existing playlist OR create new topical playlist
- ☐ **Pinned Comment Prepared:** Write comment to pin immediately after publish (ask a question)

PHASE 5: Strategic Promotion (First 48 Hours = Make or Break)

Hour 1-2 After Publishing:

- ☐ **Pin Your Comment:** Post and pin a comment asking engaging question
- ☐ **Share to Community Tab:** Post teaser with video link
- ☐ **Respond to EVERY Comment:** First 2 hours are critical for engagement signals
- ☐ **Email List (if you have one):** Send notification with direct link

First 24 Hours:

- ☐ **Social Media Sharing:** Post to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn with context (not just link)
- ☐ **Relevant Online Communities:** Share in niche forums/groups WHERE APPROPRIATE (provide value, don't spam)
- ☐ **Cross-Promote on Other Platforms:** Instagram stories, TikTok mention (if applicable)
- ☐ **Continue Comment Engagement:** Reply to every comment within 4-6 hours

Day 2-7:

- ☐ **Monitor YouTube Studio:** Check impressions CTR daily
- ☐ **CTR Below 4% After 100+ Impressions:** Consider changing thumbnail (title usually fine if optimized)
- ☐ **Average View Duration Below 40%:** Analyze retention graph, improve hooks in future videos
- ☐ **Continue Engagement:** Reply to new comments at least once daily

PHASE 6: Performance Analysis & Continuous Improvement

Week 1 Analysis (Day 7):

- ☐ **Check Key Metrics in YouTube Studio:**

• Impressions: How many times thumbnail shown
• CTR (Click-Through Rate): Target 4-10%
• Average View Duration: Target 40-60%
• Traffic Sources: Where views coming from

- ☐ **If CTR is Low (<4%):** Problem is title or thumbnail (usually thumbnail)
- ☐ **If AVD is Low (<40%):** Problem is content delivery or hook wasn't strong enough
- ☐ **Search Rankings Check:** Search your keyword in incognito—where does your video appear?

Month 1 Analysis:

- ☐ **Identify Best Performing Videos:** Which have highest CTR + AVD combination?

- ☐ **Pattern Recognition:** What do top performers have in common? (topic, format, length)
- ☐ **Create More Content in Winning Branch:** Double down on what works
- ☐ **Update Old Descriptions:** Add links to newer related videos
- ☐ **Playlist Optimization:** Create playlist around best-performing topic cluster

PHASE 7: Scaling What Works

- ☐ **Batch Content Creation:** Film 3-5 videos in one session (same branch/topic cluster)
- ☐ **Repurpose Top Performers:** Create 'Part 2' or updated version of best videos
- ☐ **Cross-Reference Videos:** Mention and link to other videos in your branch throughout content
- ☐ **Collaborate Strategically:** Partner with channels 20-50% bigger than yours in same niche
- ☐ **Create Shorts from Long-Form:** Extract 30-60 second clips, link back to full video
- ☐ **Yearly Updates:** Re-film top performers with '[Topic] 2027' in title
- ☐ **Advanced Keyword Targeting:** Once you dominate one branch, expand to adjacent branch

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Quick Reference: Numbers to Remember

Metric	Target	What It Means
Title Length	Under 60 chars	Prevents truncation on mobile
Description	250-500 words	Sweet spot for SEO without overwhelming
Tags	8-15 tags	Enough context, not diluted focus
CTR (Week 1)	4-10%	Title/thumbnail working well
AVD	40-60%	Content delivering on promise
First 30 Seconds	Say keyword	Speech recognition for SEO
Pattern Interrupts	Every 60-90s	Maintains viewer attention
Comment Response	Within 2 hours	Critical engagement signal

5 Biggest Mistakes Small Creators Make:

1. Filming Before Keyword Research: You're gambling with your time. Always validate demand first.

2. Ignoring Competition Analysis: Not all keywords are winnable. Check who's ranking before committing.

3. Weak Hooks: If viewers leave in first 30 seconds, nothing else matters. Master your opening.

4. Rushed Metadata: Spending 10 hours filming but 5 minutes on title/description = wasted effort.

5. No Promotion Strategy: Upload and pray doesn't work. First 48 hours determine success.

Ready to Master YouTube SEO?

This checklist gives you the tactical execution steps. But the complete system goes much deeper:

✓ **Advanced keyword research frameworks** with case studies showing how to identify winnable opportunities even in competitive niches

✓ **Content creation psychology** backed by retention data—learn exactly what keeps viewers watching

✓ **Metadata optimization formulas** that consistently beat competitors in search rankings

✓ **Promotion strategies** that amplify your reach 10x beyond just 'share on social media'

✓ **Monetization blueprints** for turning views into sustainable income (even before you hit 1,000 subscribers)

✓ **Real case studies** from channels that went from 0 to 100K+ subscribers using this exact system

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Use this checklist for every video. Consistency + strategy = inevitable growth.

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